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ABSTRACT

The schools attended by young adolescents must be transformed into "communities for learning" that provide students with a climate fostering their intellectual development. Such communities have high expectations for students, challenge them with an integrated curriculum, offer meaningful relationships with adults, and maintain an environment where students feel safe, motivated, and engaged with their schoolwork. According to the U.S. Education Department's National Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), which surveyed 25,000 American eighth graders, such learning communities are seldom found in our schools. Regarding school relationships, data show that by spring of the school year, 35 percent of eighth-grade students said they had not talked with their teacher about coursework during the school year and 65 percent had not discussed their course selections with a school counselor. Concerning learning readiness, teachers said that 20 percent of sampled eighth graders were inattentive; 47 percent of the students said they were bored at least half the time spent in school. Over 10 percent of eighth graders were frequently absent, and a third had been sent to the office for misbehaving. School climate is far from engaging, with a significant percentage of students citing tardiness, absenteeism, cutting class, and class disruption as serious problems. Fundamental restructuring is needed to redress these problems. Specific recommendations are outlined. (Three references) (MLH)

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Issues In Education

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U.S. Department of Education
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Restructuring Schools for Young Adolescents

Educators, politicians, and business leaders agree the time has come to overhaul our schools to improve learning and instruction.

Indeed, when the President and the governors adopted the six national education goals they agreed on the need to restructure schools to effectively educate all children.

The schools attended by young adolescents are particularly in need of change. Researchers, teachers, and principals agree that to be effective, these schools need to be "communities for learning." Such communities provide students with a climate that enhances their intellectual development. Such communities have high expectations of students, challenge them with an integrated curriculum, offer meaningful relationships with adults, and maintain an environment where students feel safe. Such communities are places where students take schooling seriously, where they are motivated and ready to learn, and where they are engaged in their schoolwork.

Unfortunately, these learning communities are not found in most of our schools. Just how far we are from having effective schools for young adolescents is illustrated by new data produced by the Education Department's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, which surveyed 25,000 American eighth-graders, their parents, their teachers, and their principals in the spring of 1988. The study is called the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988—NELS:88 for short—and it will follow these same 25,000 youngsters every 2 years as they move into high school and college or the labor market.

The portrait painted by NELS:88 reveals the disparity between the schools we have and those we want for young adolescents.

School Relationships

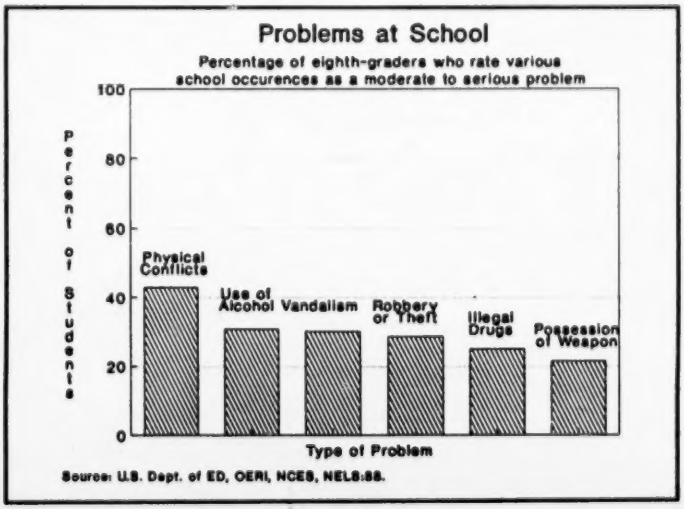
An important characteristic of effective schools is that students have stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships with teachers and other school personnel. But the data show:

- By spring of the school year, one-third (35 percent) of eighth-grade students said they had not talked with their teacher about coursework during the school year.
- Sixty percent of eighth-graders had not discussed the selection of their courses with a school counselor.
- Two-thirds (68 percent) of the schools had departmentalized instruction, where students move throughout the day from class to class, teacher to teacher.
- About one-third (37 percent) of eighth-graders attend schools with more than 800 classmates.

Students in Schools

The model of an effective school assumes that students take school seriously and arrive prepared to learn. But according to NELS:88:

- Teachers say that about one out of five eighth-graders is inattentive in class.
- More than one in five eighth-graders usually or often come to class without pencil or paper. A similar proportion come to class without having finished their homework.
- Nearly half (47 percent) of the students say they are bored at least half the time they spend in school.



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- More than 10 percent of eighth-graders are frequently absent. A similar proportion are frequently disruptive.

- About a third of the students have been sent to the office for misbehaving.

- More than 30 percent of the students' parents have received a warning about their children's grades, and 22 percent have received a warning about the children's behavior.

School Climate

To be effective, schools need to provide an environment that engages students. While many students are disengaged, other students see the disruptions caused by their disengaged classmates as significant problems. The NELS:88 data show:

- At least a third of eighth-graders report that tardiness, absenteeism, and cutting class are moderate to serious school problems.

- About 40 percent of eighth-graders report that class disruptions by other students often get in the way of their learning.

While most eighth-grade students (88 percent) feel safe at school, many students report that physical conflicts (43 percent), robbery or theft (29 percent), vandalism of school property (31 percent), alcohol (31 percent), illegal drugs (25 percent), and weapons (21 percent) are moderate to serious problems at their schools.

Restructuring Schools

In February, the President and the governors called for sweeping and fundamental change in our education system. The governors renewed their call for restructuring last month in Mobile.

"Schools have changed less than any other public institution in meeting the requirements of our changing society, even though education is the fundamental tool that enables all other public and private institutions to exist," said Christopher T. Cross, Assistant Secretary of Education for Research and Improvement. "Education must be made rigorous and interesting. The people who work in it must be accountable. We must make our young people understand that we care about them, that we expect high performance, and that America values excellence."

The NELS:88 data clearly show how far schools are from what educational research has shown to be effective learning environments. How do schools for young adolescents need to change? They need:

- To be small communities that offer a climate where learning is valued and where teachers know their students well and have high expectations for their students.

- To teach a rigorous core academic program to all students.

- To ensure success for all students through flexible instructional strategies that can serve a diverse body of students.

- To re-engage families by providing regular information about school programs and students' progress. Parents must be more interested and involved in their children's education.

- To offer incentives that encourage and reward student engagement, high academic performance, and improvement.

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